

# Strategy for Digitizing Archival Materials for Public Access, 2007–2016

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## Introduction

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is the Government agency that preserves and provides access to the U.S. Government's collection of documents recording the important events in American history. Our archival holdings number more than 10 billion pages of unique documents, many of them handwritten, and include formats such as maps, charts, aerial and still photographs, artifacts, and motion picture, sound, and video recordings. The records we hold belong to the public and our mission is to ensure the public can discover, use, and learn from the records of their Government.

This *Strategy for Digitizing Archival Materials for Public Access, 2007–2016*, builds from the NARA Strategic Plan (Preserving the Past to Protect the Future: The Strategic Plan of the National Archives and Records Administration, 2006–2016) in the area of strategies for expanding public access to our important historical holdings through digitization. We sought the input of our stakeholders and users last year on the draft digitizing strategy, and have incorporated it into this final document.

## Scope

NARA is unique among Government agencies in that we are charged with making the Government's *historical* information available to the public. We have many innovative programs and partnerships for doing so, including partnerships with the Foundation for the National Archives and various Presidential Library Foundations that support both traditional and online exhibits and education programs.

This document addresses our efforts to digitize and make available historical documents to the public online. The strategy applies to a diverse and vast range of permanent records that have been accessioned into the holdings of the National Archives of the United States, including the 14 Regional Archives and the 12 Presidential Libraries, as well as our two Washington, DC, area facilities.

This document does not address permanent records in our custody that are "born digital." These are being addressed by our Electronic Records Archives (ERA) project. It also does not include current information dissemination products, such as NARA reports and plans, privacy and accessibility notices, or records management guidance. NARA provides to the public an inventory of information dissemination products and priorities for placing them online at [www.archives.gov/comment/web-priorities.html](http://www.archives.gov/comment/web-priorities.html).

The strategy implements a national, system-wide approach to NARA's digitizing activities.

## Digitizing Objectives

NARA has identified the following objectives for digitizing our holdings for public access:

- Provide online access to an increased number of our holdings.
- Enhance preservation of records by reducing wear and tear on the originals for reference and reproduction. While digitizing for access has some preservation benefits, it is not the same as preservation digitizing. We will not destroy or de-accession any originals that are digitized for access.
- Provide access to those materials that can no longer be accessed in their original format.
- Enhance users' understanding of records authenticity and archival context (e.g., who created the records; why were they created; how were they used).
- Use resources effectively. For example, original records that have been digitized may be relocated to less expensive archival storage locations. Partnerships, where the partner provides resources for digitizing, would expand the scale of digitizing beyond what NARA itself can do.
- Improve our service to customers consistent with their evolving expectations and with consideration of NARA's available resources and customers' willingness to pay for value-added or convenience services.
- Promote equitable access to Government information by the public.

## Current Public Access to Online Content

To improve public access, NARA is working to create one central inventory of all of our archival holdings, the Archival Research Catalog (ARC). Available on our web site, [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov), ARC currently contains descriptions of more than half of our permanent holdings and more than 126,000 digitized copies of holdings. Information can also be found on our web site in the *Guide to Federal Records* and other online finding aids that have not yet been transferred to ARC. We are exploring new ways to provide integrated searching of all of our online content, regardless of its location or host. We emphasize that these tools provide users the ability to identify what archival holdings we have by reviewing their descriptions; except for the material digitized and made available through ARC, they do not provide access to the holdings themselves. We reiterate that most of our holdings currently are available only from the archival facility in which they are stored. By digitizing these holdings, we will vastly increase public access to them.

## Definition of Digitizing for Public Access

For the purposes of this document, "digitizing" should be understood not just as the act of scanning an analog document into digital form but as a series of activities that results in a digital copy being made available to end users via the Internet or other means for a sustained length of time. The activities include:

- Document identification and selection
- Document preparation (including preservation, access review and screening, locating, pulling, and refileing)
- Basic descriptive and technical metadata collection sufficient to allow retrieval and management of the digital copies and to provide basic contextual information for the user
- Digital conversion
- Quality control of digital copies and metadata
- Providing public access to the material via online delivery of reliable and authentic copies



- Providing online ordering for reproduction services at quality or quantities beyond the capacity of an end user
- Maintenance of digital copies and metadata
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- Maintenance of digital copies and metadata

## Approach to Digitizing

NARA will use a combination of five strategies for digitizing and making holdings available online:

### STRATEGY ONE

NARA will gather and make available on the web archival materials that we have already digitized in the course of performing our agency functions but for one reason or another are not available online.

### STRATEGY TWO

NARA will establish partnerships with organizations from a variety of sectors (private, public, non-profit, educational, Government) to digitize and make available holdings. Partnerships present an opportunity for increased access to historical Government information through the increased availability of information technology products and services. Partnerships will enable NARA to make more digitized holdings available than we could on our own, because the partner will bear most of the expense of digitizing.

The products of these digitizing partnership efforts may also include value-added services and features provided by the partner, such as searchable text and detailed indexing and, as such, are not considered NARA Government electronic information dissemination products. However, partners may not claim copyright on the digital images.

To ensure that NARA maintains its public trust, NARA has developed a set of principles to guide partnership agreements. These principles are found at the end of this document. Most significantly, the principles state:

- Partnerships are non-exclusive. By “non-exclusive,” we mean that we will not be seeking a single partner to digitize all of our materials but that we will welcome different partners for different sets of materials. For preservation reasons, we expect to enter into only one partnership for each set of original materials.
- After the agreed-upon period of time, NARA has the right to sell a set of the digital copies to another entity for unrestricted use.
- Partners may charge the public for access to their online services, but online access to the products of the partnerships will always remain free in NARA research rooms. NARA would prefer, of course, that public access is free or very inexpensive in all cases; but market realities dictate otherwise, and we believe that the dramatic increase in access provided by partnerships is in the public interest. Moreover, because access to the holdings is now available (free) in all NARA research rooms—not just in the location that houses the originals—partnerships significantly increase free access to the holdings. Partnerships also offer researchers an alternative for accessing NARA holdings if the researcher is not able to come to a NARA facility or does not wish to purchase reproductions from NARA.
- After the agreed-upon period of time, NARA will have the right to provide free online access to the digitized materials. We will strive to minimize that period of time, with short time frames making a partnership offer more attractive; we cannot, however, categorically identify a maximum time because of the many variables in a partnership proposal. We intend in principle to make the digital copies available as quickly as funds and capabilities allow, once permitted to do so by the terms of the partnership.
- We will publicize and seek written comments on proposed partnerships before they are signed. We will do so by alerting the public and interested communities by making announcements on our web sites and posting messages on major listservs. At the same time, we will be careful to protect the proprietary or other sensitive business information of our potential partners.

See our web site at [www.archives.gov/digitization/](http://www.archives.gov/digitization/) for a list and description of current partnerships into which NARA has entered formally. Our partners and the public can visit this web site to see a list of our holdings that we believe are good candidates for digitizing partnerships, and to learn how to become a partner. We will accept proposals from existing partners to digitize the materials described on the list. We also welcome suggestions from members of the public on series in our holdings that they would like to see added to the list.

### STRATEGY THREE

NARA will conduct digitizing projects on its own with materials that are not appropriate for partnerships. For example, we might digitize our “treasure vault,” at-risk material that only NARA can handle, or high-interest materials for which no partner can be found. These projects could take a variety of forms, with a variety of funding sources. The projects would be crafted with an eye toward enabling NARA to enhance its capacity to preserve and digitize holdings.

### STRATEGY FOUR

NARA will pursue digitization of archival materials as part of its preservation reformatting approach.

We continually reformat at-risk archival materials so that they may continue to be used by the public. A paper document may become so fragile that we need to create a copy for public access; or a video recording made in an outdated format, such as Betamax, must be transferred to a modern format that can be viewed on current equipment. As supplies of traditional analog reformatting media diminish due to market forces, digitization is becoming a key activity in NARA’s preservation reformatting strategy. We are in the process of adopting a digital workflow for preservation reformatting which will yield tremendous access opportunities as well. NARA commits to leveraging the work done to convert these materials by making them available online to users.

### STRATEGY FIVE

To ensure that users everywhere can access all of our digitized records, we will continue to make our online catalog (currently the Archival Research Catalog, ARC) a hub for discovering NARA’s digital images. Our partners, our describers, and our digital labs are creating data that we assimilate into ARC, so that users have comprehensive access to NARA’s digital copies, whether on NARA’s web site or our partners’ web sites, regardless of their location on the web. Users will not only be provided efficient access to the records via the online catalog but will also have the archival context of those records.

## Prioritizing

This strategy does not intend to enumerate specific sets of holdings and identify the order in which they should be digitized. Our holdings are too vast and our users too varied to do that in any meaningful way. Rather, this document establishes, at a high level, basic principles for prioritizing our efforts:

- The digitizing of the materials in question meets a demonstrated need of one or more of our major customer groups.
- Digitizing the materials in question meets a demonstrated and high priority preservation need for the agency consistent with the proper performance of agency function.
- Funding is available or likely to be available and sustainable for the project.



In order to manage and publicize our efforts and to serve as many user groups as possible, NARA will maintain an agency-wide public list of its approved digital projects. Although these projects will be developed and implemented by a variety of NARA units throughout the country, we will strive to manage them as a coherent, coordinated portfolio of products and services. This list also will be available on our web site at [www.archives.gov/digitization/](http://www.archives.gov/digitization/).

## Process for Feedback

NARA takes its stewardship responsibility very seriously. We recognize that we are entrusted with the care of America's documentary evidence, and that these materials are an invaluable public resource. We sought written comment on a draft version of this document through a *Federal Register* notice and announcement on our web site, and held a public forum during the comment period. We received comments from more than 300 individuals and organizations. We revised this document to incorporate many of the comments we received. We received many public suggestions on which materials to digitize when we propose materials for potential partnerships. We will consider these suggestions as we compile lists of records for partnership digitization. And, we appreciate and will further address some of the more detailed or specific comments we received as work in this area continues.

The principles embodied in this document are intended as guidelines rather than hard and fast rules. We expect that the strategy will undergo revision given the fast pace of technical change and the broadening of our own experience. Accordingly, we will review and update this document at least annually, and if we make significant changes to our strategy, we will seek public comment on the new version.

## NARA Principles for Partnerships to Digitize Archival Materials

1. Agreements with partners to digitize archival materials will be non-exclusive. That is, we will be open to multiple digitizing partners for different sets of materials, not that we will have the same original archival materials digitized by multiple parties.
2. After an agreed-upon period of time, NARA gains unrestricted rights to the digital copies, including the right to give or sell unrestricted digital copies in whole or part to other entities.
3. Partnerships will support the goals of increased access and enhanced preservation of archival materials. NARA considers its partnerships to be one component in furtherance of these goals because partnering will accelerate the digitization of our physical records. However, we will continue to take actions to enable the digitization of records by other means (e.g., funded grants). Our objective is to both digitize high-use records and to continue to develop our own capacity to digitize archival materials.
4. To provide for full access and effective preservation, partners will digitize full series or file segments of records, not just selected documents. This will allow for the removal of the original records from research room use. However, when a partnership primarily intends to support the development of educational materials, online exhibits, and other thematic presentations, or in the rare case that a partial series digitization may otherwise support NARA's access and preservation goals, NARA may choose to permit the digitization of selected archival materials rather than full series or file segments of records.
5. Public access to publicly owned resources will remain free. Partners may develop and charge for value-added features, but access to the digital copies ultimately should be readily accessible and free. NARA acknowledges partners' potential proprietary interest in the digital copies and to value-added features and also emphasizes its own need to maintain and provide an "archival view" of the materials that allows us to understand the actions of Government (e.g., who created the records? Why? How were the records used? What is their original order? How do they relate to other records of the same person or organization?).

- Access to the products of the partnership will be free to the public in all NARA's research rooms.
  - Partners shall provide NARA without charge a full set of the digital copies produced by the partnership. These copies shall adhere to NARA's technical specifications. Ultimately, NARA will have unrestricted ownership of these copies, including the right to make these copies freely available online.
  - Partners shall provide NARA without charge a set of metadata generated by the project sufficient to make the digitized copies usable by NARA, and that adheres to NARA's descriptive standards. Ultimately NARA will have unrestricted ownership of this metadata.
6. NARA will structure partnerships to balance the interests of the American public with the partner's financial investment in the project. There is no single required partnership model.
  7. NARA cannot guarantee the authenticity of the digital copies. While NARA expects the partner to take reasonable measures to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the digital copy, including assurances to protect against hacking or other security violation of converted materials, NARA cannot endorse the authenticity of archival materials hosted on a digitizing partner's web site. Although NARA will guarantee that our digital copies have not been altered after we take possession, copies for users requiring certification will be made from the original documents or NARA-created microfilm.
  8. No partnership agreement to digitize access-restricted materials shall permit the release of these materials before an agreed-upon date or specific contingency, nor shall it delay timely public access.
  9. The safety and accessibility of original records will be safeguarded at all times during the digitizing process.
    - Archival materials will be handled according to the relevant preservation and security standards at all times.
    - NARA makes the final determination whether archival materials are too fragile for digitization through a partnership.
    - To minimize handling wear-and-tear, original materials normally will only be digitized once.
    - Digitization will take place at a NARA facility or at another facility which has been approved by NARA.
    - NARA and partners will seek to minimize the amount of time archival materials will be removed from public access during the digitizing process.
  10. NARA will seek to protect and enhance its own institutional interests, while at the same time respecting the interests of our users and our partners.
    - NARA makes the final determination regarding whether materials may be digitized or not.
    - Any use of the NARA brand must be approved in writing by NARA.
    - The partner shall pay all direct costs associated with the digitizing partnerships, to include project management, document identification, collections security (including Federally-required staff, contractor, and volunteer background investigations), document preparation (including access review and preservation activities), metadata collection and quality control, data management, digital conversion, and partner's delivery, marketing, and maintenance, especially when the partner is for-profit or the project is large in scale. NARA may exercise more leeway when the partner is not-for-profit or if the project is especially important to the mission of the agency. NARA will seek partner assistance in defraying NARA's own delivery, marketing, and maintenance costs.
    - NARA does not allow for wholesale downloading of a large or complete body of digital content on our web site, both to protect the proprietary interests of our partner in the digital copy and to safeguard NARA's computer systems.
    - The partner may not claim copyright in the digital copy.
  11. NARA will publicize and seek written comment on proposed partnerships before they are signed.